

Workforce

A Pan-Lanarkshire Approach to the Graduate Apprenticeship in Social Work

North and South Lanarkshire Councils

Background

The Graduate Apprenticeship (GA) in Social Work was designed as a work based route delivered in partnership with the university sector and national partners. It aligns academic study with employment, enabling apprentices to develop as social workers while remaining embedded in service. The GA was developed with the University of the West of Scotland alongside sector bodies including SSSC and SDS, reflecting an employer informed model intended to meet local authority workforce needs. North Lanarkshire and South Lanarkshire Councils have both adopted the programme and are currently piloting it, with strong engagement and interest demonstrated from the beginning.

In North Lanarkshire Council, the programme sits within an established career pathway infrastructure, with six internally recruited apprentices selected from a strong field of 75 applicants. They are supported through student social work hubs that provide structured teaching and live duty experience, with a phased move into rotational placements across service areas underpinned by targeted backfill to maintain service continuity. In South Lanarkshire Council, four apprentices were appointed from over 50 applications and progressed directly into year two through recognition of prior learning. They are scheduled for substantial rotated placements in years three and four to help balance breadth of experience with operational needs. Both councils have worked closely with the university on selection, phasing and support, adapting processes in response to early learning from the pilot.

Key activities

North Lanarkshire Council

1. Co design and strategic alignment

North Lanarkshire engaged early in the programme's development from an employer perspective to ensure the model met local authority needs. This was anchored to the One Workforce plan and built on a strong track record with Graduate Apprenticeships across multiple disciplines since 2018, providing a clear rationale and governance for adopting the Social Work GA.

2. Competitive internal recruitment with streamlined enablement

An internal recruitment round attracted 75 applications for six places, evidencing strong demand from the existing workforce. The volume created a significant administrative load, prompting the council to refine processes and involve HR from the outset, with university participation in selection to align with academic requirements.

3. Hub based induction with live duty and structured teaching

Student social work hubs, established in 2020, provide structured teaching, supervision and peer support, with learning tied to live cases. Apprentices complete an extended induction that includes weekly duty within the children and families team, allowing them to apply university learning in real time and arrive at placements with foundational skills in areas such as risk assessment, analysis and report writing.

4. Rotational placements and targeted backfill

Following an extended induction process, apprentices rotate across service areas to broaden competence and transfer learning between teams. To manage operational impact, the council secured backfill funding and uses the rotational model to minimise gaps, aiming to balance a cost effective pathway with service continuity.

South Lanarkshire Council

1. High demand selection with university partnership and cross council collaboration

Interest was strong, with 56 applications, 12 interviews and four appointments. The council co designed recruitment and selection materials with support from North Lanarkshire and included university representation on interview panels to ensure candidates matched the expectations of the work based academic route.

2. Recognition of prior learning and a stay in post year two

Through recognition of their prior learning, apprentices progressed directly into year two while remaining in post. Regular meetings with assessors and day to day support from team based mentors connect academic outcomes with practice tasks, providing stability for services during the early phase.

3. Planned rotations and substantial placements in years three and four

From year three, apprentices move into substantial practice placements, typically between 100 and 200 days, with a different placement in year four. Rotations are planned across different teams, such as a switch between adult services and children and families, to ensure contrasting practice contexts and exposure to a wide range of casework. The rotation pattern is sequenced to support operational planning and backfill, so teams can anticipate capacity changes during defined placement windows.

4. Retention focused pathway within a lean practice learning structure

The council's piloting of the GA responded to long standing recruitment and retention pressures, including staff movement to neighbouring councils offering "grow your own" routes. A small practice learning function steers delivery and review with a clear emphasis on progression and retention, turning the GA into a practical in house pathway that helps stem outflow and build a sustainable pipeline of future social workers.

Benefits and impact

Workforce planning and succession

Both councils used the Graduate Apprenticeship to strengthen workforce planning by creating a structured pipeline into qualified social work roles. North Lanarkshire embedded the programme

within its existing career pathway infrastructure, using it to complement established “grow your own” activity and to support succession planning in Social Work. South Lanarkshire positioned the route as a practical solution to supply pressures by offering a clear progression pathway where previous budget pressures had limited internal routes. In each case, the programme has demonstrated strong staff demand and provided a mechanism to shape future workforce supply through planned, well-supported cohorts.

Recruitment and retention

The programme directly supports retention by offering experienced staff in non registered social work roles (e.g., family support workers and social work assistants) a defined way to progress without leaving their council. For North Lanarkshire, the cultural benefits of investing in staff highlight that those trained internally are more likely to continue working for the council, thus supporting retention. South Lanarkshire’s adoption of the GA as a response to previous movement to neighbouring councils demonstrates a commitment to staff career progression that, in turn, strengthens workforce stability and reduces outward movement.

Learning quality and practice readiness

A work based model that ties academic learning to live casework improves practice readiness in both areas. North Lanarkshire’s hub first induction, with duty and structured teaching, enables apprentices to build core skills before rotations, reducing the pressure on placement teams at the point of transfer. South Lanarkshire’s sequencing integrates academic progression while apprentices remain in post initially, followed by substantial, rotated placements across contrasting settings. The shared effect is a more supported transition from academic outcomes to competent frontline practice.

Operational balance and cost considerations

The pilots were designed to balance learning with service continuity. North Lanarkshire combined a rotational model with targeted backfill to manage operational gaps while keeping the route affordable by using apprenticeship funding for the qualification. South Lanarkshire scheduled substantial placements later in the programme and planned rotations across teams to support pragmatic backfill. In both cases, the operational design minimised disruption to services while apprentices progressed, demonstrating that work based routes can be scaled without wholesale secondments if rotations and induction are carefully timed.

Learning and reflections

Partnership working

A key finding from the pilot has been the importance of strong partnerships. Early delivery highlighted differences between university systems and local authority approaches, prompting close coordination with the University throughout the pilot phase. The relationship allowed for co designed selection and ongoing support aligned with academic requirements. Collaboration between the councils also accelerated learning, with shared materials and approaches informing recruitment and phasing.

Programme design and phasing

North Lanarkshire’s approach indicates that a front loaded induction in hubs, including regular duty, allows apprentices to arrive at placements confident and prepared, while reducing pressure on teams. Equally, South Lanarkshire’s model provides an effective balance between learning progression and service stability.

Recruitment and process management

Early delivery has surfaced clear lessons for future cohorts. At North Lanarkshire, recruitment workflows were streamlined to handle high volumes efficiently, with HR engaged from the outset so policies, resourcing and timelines are aligned. The demand for South Lanarkshire's programme validated the need for co designed materials and a gradual, supported approach to learning.

Support, capacity and continuous learner feedback

Structured support is a fundamental requirement at all scales, underpinning the conditions for successful learning and development. In North Lanarkshire, hubs and practice learning arrangements offer visible and consistent support. In South Lanarkshire, a lean practice learning function coordinates assessor oversight and team based mentoring to connect academic learning with day to day practice. Regular conversations with apprentices, through assessor meetings and mentoring, generate practical feedback on how academic requirements translate into workplace tasks. These insights inform adjustments to sequencing, placement planning and support arrangements, helping the employer–university partnership refine delivery for future cohorts.

Together, North and South Lanarkshire Councils show how a work based route can turn ambition into a practical pipeline for social work, coupling university partnership with real time learning in service. North Lanarkshire's hub based induction and rotations build confident, practice ready apprentices, and South Lanarkshire's assessor–mentor support and planned placements create a stable, scalable path that retains talent. High demand at recruitment and strong collaboration across councils and academia signal a sustainable approach that strengthens workforce capacity, improves readiness for practice and embeds development as part of everyday service delivery.

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